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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 001749

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SUBJECT: AQABA PORT STRIKE LEADS TO SECURITY CRACKDOWN

REF: A. AMMAN 834
[1](#)B. 08 AMMAN 2383

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Lawrence Mandel
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Gendarmerie forces in the southern Jordanian city of Aqaba used violence to break up a sit-in by workers at the general cargo port on July 31. Despite intense negotiations to end the dispute, an agreement has proven elusive. Sixty-five protesters were taken into custody and three sustained minor injuries. One protester was flown to Amman in a coma after sustaining serious injuries, although the cause of those injuries is a subject of debate. Jordanian government officials have denied responsibility for the gendarmerie's actions in the face of media criticism. The protest is connected to the sale of the land which the port sits on to an Emirati conglomerate in [1](#)2008. Mismanagement of the sale and its social consequences led to friction between port workers and the government owners of the port. End Summary.

Strike!

[1](#)2. (U) Workers at the Aqaba general cargo port staged a two day sit-in July 30-31 to protest job losses and a housing compensation agreement connected to the sale of the port to an Emirati conglomerate (see paragraph eight). While the protest was by all accounts peaceful, troops from the newly-created gendarmerie used violence to break up the sit-in. One worker was severely injured, three of the workers suffered minor injuries, and 65 protesters were arrested.

[1](#)3. (SBU) One protester, Ahed Alawneh, was sent to Amman for treatment after lapsing into a coma. Internet rumors held that Alawneh was presumed dead by the gendarmerie after being beaten and was pushed out of a moving truck by officials afraid of the consequences. Official press statements, on the other hand, claimed that Alawneh suffered only minor injuries. Alawneh's family promised to file a lawsuit against the Aqaba governor, the Aqaba Development Corporation (ADC), and the gendarmerie. Alawneh's tribe also promised to lodge protests with the government and parliament.

[1](#)4. (C) A post contact in the National Center for Human Rights (NCHR) was dispatched to Aqaba on July 30th to monitor the protest and the response of the gendarmerie. (Note: The strike is the first major public labor action in Jordan in over twenty years, the last being a strike by taxi drivers that was broken up by security forces in 1988. End Note.) NCHR staff sat in on closed-door negotiations between the protesters and ADC designed to quell unrest and create a mutually agreeable solution. The workers were represented in those negotiations by the secretary general of the General Federation of Trade Unions, despite the fact that the port workers are not unionized. After an initial agreement was announced, the workers rejected it as tainted by the participation of an outside union official whom they believe failed to advocate properly for the workers' demands. The

sit-in later resumed, and is ongoing as of August 4.

Media and Government Reaction

15. (SBU) The gendarmerie has faced growing criticism from the media and even other parts of the government for its handling of the protests. Interior Minister Nayef Al-Qadi, who commands the gendarmerie, denied any role in ordering the crackdown. PM Nader Al-Dahabi expressed his displeasure with the gendarmerie's actions through a spokesman and called on ADC and the protesters to come to an agreement.

16. (SBU) Aqaba Governor Ziad Zreiqat, who is the Interior Ministry employee responsible for security matters in the province, defended his role in putting down the protest. Zreiqat branded the demonstration as "illegal" since the protesters had not obtained prior permission for their actions as required by the Public Gatherings Law. Zreiqat emphasized that the security forces were unusually tolerant of such an unplanned action and resorted to more extreme measures only when the sit-in began to "violate public safety and stability."

17. (C) Both mainstream and internet media coverage of the incident tended to favor the protesters. Influential Al-Ghad columnist Mohammed Abu Rumman characterized the crackdown as "very sad and painful," noting that it generated needless negative attention in the regional and international press. The Prime Minister and other government officials have been portrayed as uninterested in the plight of the workers and more concerned with protecting their political careers by

AMMAN 00001749 002 OF 002

distancing themselves from responsibility. Some columnists connected the protests with government mismanagement of privatization.

The Port Land Sale

18. (C) The protest is connected to the 2008 sale of the port's land to an Emirati conglomerate for USD 500 million. The land is currently owned by the ADC, itself a subsidiary of the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority (ASEZA), which serves as Aqaba's effective government in all matters except for security and health services. Under the sale agreement, ADC will deliver the land in a series of three tranches to the Emirati investors as the general cargo facilities are gradually moved to a location close to the Saudi border. The first tranche of land, which was supposed to be delivered in July 2009, contains housing built decades ago for over 400 port workers who received apartments gratis from ADC. As recently as April, ADC was still working on a compensation agreement that would allow residents to relocate and allow construction crews to raze structures on the site.

ADC's Compensation Agreement

19. (C) Several months ago, ADC released a compensation agreement which offered between JD 20,000 and JD 24,000 (USD 28,000-33,600) as compensation for each worker displaced as part of the land sale. Compensation was only offered to the workers who were actually living in the ADC-owned apartments, however. Several thousand ADC workers who were originally eligible to receive apartments declined the benefit, either because they wanted to stay in houses they already owned or because they found the alternative housing offered by ADC inadequate.

110. (C) The compensation package created two categories of grievance: those who complain that the compensation is not enough, and those who complain that they received no benefit at all. ADC workers who are to be compensated point out that the amount is not enough to buy alternative housing in the

booming Aqaba real estate market. While Aqaba is attempting to alleviate a growing housing crunch, the current economic slowdown has led to a slump in new housing construction, particularly for low-income housing. Workers who did not elect to receive free housing from ADC feel slighted by the compensation agreement, which gives a large windfall to ADC workers who required housing because they were not originally Aqaba residents.

Job Losses

¶11. (C) While it was clear from the beginning that the sale and relocation of the general cargo port would lead to a trimming of the port's work force to make its operations more profitable and efficient, there was never a coordinated effort to retrain or find alternative employment for port workers. Contacts in Aqaba are also telling us that promises were made by ADC management to assist with job placement for port workers -- promises that have now been annulled, creating animosity and bitterness.

¶12. (C) A tender that would privatize operation of the general cargo port was floated earlier this year with a due date of June 30. Post contacts in ADC have told us that two bids are currently being considered, with a final decision forthcoming in the near future. If that announcement comes in the near future, it will likely re-open the current debate about the fate of the workers.

Comment

¶13. (C) Jordan's government and ADC had nearly two years to prevent this protest. From the time the contract with the Emirati buyer was signed, it was clear that residents of the ADC housing would have to move and that some port workers would lose their jobs. Rather than acting early to negotiate a compensation agreement on housing directly with the workers, ADC presented a compensation agreement as a fait accompli at the last minute with almost no input from the community. Rather than acting early to retrain port workers or give them time to find other jobs, ADC management offered empty assurances that workers would be taken care of. The gendarmerie's actions and the subsequent denial of responsibility by the entire chain of command in the GOJ only added fuel to the fire. While the workers' claims to further compensation may be debatable, they have been handed a public relations victory by a government establishment that seems tone deaf.

Mandel